
Peer-Reviewed Article

Trifecta of student engagement framework: A catalyst to online course success and degree completion for transfer students?

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the benefits of implementing the Trifecta of Student Engagement Framework in online courses and its subsequent benefit to transfer students, including degree completion. Many students who seek to transfer from community colleges are nontraditional and due to the rapidly increasing financial concern resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges are growing in popularity as a cost-effective option for many potential and existing college students. It is critical for the often-nontraditional transfer student to feel engaged in courses to facilitate their ultimate goal of degree completion. The Trifecta of Student Engagement framework proposes that students need to be engaged with course content, peers, and instructor to be wholly engaged in an online course. The Trifecta of Student Engagement framework may, in turn, aid buy-in to the university, academic programs and ultimately aid in the enablement of degree completion for transfer students.

Keywords: trifecta of student engagement framework, online learning, transfer students, nontraditional students, student engagement



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Introduction

The focus on affordability in higher education and lowering the cost of a bachelor's degree has made the transfer process an integral part of degree completion for many students. Blackwell's (2018) research shows that only 41% of transfer students pursuing a bachelor's degree achieve that goal (as cited in Poisel & Joseph, 2018). In the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, higher education has experienced numerous changes in course delivery methodology. As courses migrate from a traditional face-to-face format to partially or exclusively online, consistency in course structure and information delivery is necessary to maximize transfer student engagement to ensure an uptick in degree completion rates. While an abrupt shift to partially or exclusively online courses may pose challenges for the traditional college student population, the challenges posed to transfer students may be even greater. Transfer student backgrounds often differ from that of non-transfer peers. Transfer students are likelier to come from underrepresented or marginalized backgrounds, be juggling full-time employment with school requirements, be older than the traditional demographic, or have family obligations to which they may be financially responsible (Roberts et al., 2019). These characteristics may influence transfer students' ability to seamlessly transition to the next institution (Roberts et al., 2019). Transfer students who have increasing demands outside of school placed on them may burn out—and though an opportunity exists to work ahead in some online courses, transfer students fitting this demographic may find time management and course engagement challenging. Lewis et al. (2014) contend that with adequate provisions in place, students deemed high risk for drop out and course incompleteness may overcome challenges in the learning environment.

Transfer Students

With recent unemployment trends skyrocketing in the US as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, community colleges and colleges and universities with lower cost tuition prepare for a potential increase in transfer students as a result of many students changing plans after expressing concerns about the cost of college (Castonguay, 2020). It is vital to address this new era of COVID-19 instruction (Castonguay, 2020), particularly as technology rapidly advances online course delivery (McFarlin et al., 2011). Advances in technology combined with the urgent need for online learning suggests that this trend will continue, perhaps at a faster pace than initially anticipated. Approximately 5.5 million students enrolled in at least one online

course at a degree-granting postsecondary institution in 2012 (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2014, as cited in Sato & Haegele, 2018), and approximately 6.6 million were enrolled in some form of distance education/online learning course by 2017. Of these 6.6 million, approximately 2.2 million enrolled in entirely distance education/online courses (Bustamante, 2020).

We must dismiss any assumption that upper-level junior and senior transfer students need less attention paid to their ability to adapt at a new university in an online course environment following their transfer from community college. Nontraditional students—defined as those over the age of 24, who work at least part-time, are parenting, delayed their college start at least one year, and are first-generation college students—are projected to make up approximately 13.3 million postsecondary education seekers by 2026, rising from approximately 12 million in 2020 (Barrington, 2020). A student must meet one of these criteria to be considered nontraditional. According to Barrington (2020) and MacDonald (n.d.), community colleges and for-profit institutions are typically the most appealing and sought-after types of schools for nontraditional transfer students. Students 25 years and over participating in formal postsecondary instruction make up approximately 44% of students in community colleges who seek to transfer for degree completion (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012, as cited in Schwehm, 2017). By assuming that transfer students are less in need of highly structured online learning environments, we do a disservice to the entire student population, particularly as many online courses undergo significant changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students may experience increased anxiety levels, feel helpless, and lose motivation in this changing environment (Millett-Thompson, 2017), and research suggests that transfer experiences and outcomes are not created equal in terms of function and pathway. According to Taylor and Jain (2017), the transfer gap and success rate in higher education are further exasperated for students who come from lower socioeconomic status and those who do not fit the mold of a traditional student. Therefore, well-designed courses facilitating student engagement with instructors, peers, and content may be critical to encouraging understanding and content mastery for transfer students. Engaged students become active learners, and many of the techniques implemented in face-to-face environments may also be utilized during digital learning by incorporating the Trifecta of Student Engagement (TSE) framework (Leslie, 2021). By ensuring all online learning experiences incorporate the TSE and encourage various communication strategies to

reach multiple learning styles and student needs, faculty can help transfer students to master content and experience success in courses.

Trifecta of Student Engagement

The Trifecta of Student Engagement (TSE), as defined by Leslie (2019), poses a possible solution to transfer student engagement in online courses. The TSE framework is adapted from Moore's (1989/1993) three types of interaction: student-to-content engagement (cognitively interacting with course content), student-to-student engagement (student collaboration and shared material with peers), and student-to-instructor engagement (stimulate interest and motivation, organize application of student learning, counsel, support, and encourage students) (Leslie, 2019). The TSE proposes that online students must engage with course content, peers, and instructor(s) to be fully engaged in a course. Kuh (2009) defines engagement as involvement in learning, and research shows that student engagement positively correlates with academic achievement, graduation rates, (Lei et al., 2018), student satisfaction (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2017), and deeper learning (Zilvinskis et al., 2017). By adhering to the TSE framework to structure and deliver online courses, we presume more significant buy-in to the university and its programs and a higher commitment to learning and course completion—potentially leading to higher transfer student engagement and bachelor's degree completion.

Learner-to-Learner Engagement

Socialization is a natural part of learning. Social cognitive theory (originally developed by Bandura (1977) as social learning theory) holds that observation, imitation, and modeling facilitate learning between persons (Leslie, 2019). University faculty and staff can fortify learner-to-learner engagement by facilitating the social learning process. Online socialization, including networking and social media, has become an essential component in people's lives, and its high potential collaborative components should be harnessed to facilitate learner-to-learner engagement in online learning. Social learning projects in which students collaborate to reach a common goal—such as discussion boards, peer feedback, interaction through student presentations and collaborative lesson planning, introductory video posts that offer like and comment options, and message boards—can be instrumental in aiding learners to present knowledge and share expertise to take ownership of learning. Course content design to facilitate learner-to-learner engagement is the first step. Learner-to-learner engagement may be

accomplished through courses and should intentionally meet Harasim's (2012) online collaborative theory and incorporate project-based learning (Roberts, 2004).

Harasim's (2012) online collaborative theory advocates for projects and requirements created to meet course outcomes while compelling students toward collaborative and cooperative learning to problem solve, cooperate to reach a common goal, and learn from one another through interaction-based assignments. This extended collaboration may aid students in completing course components otherwise deemed challenging to complete alone, thus, accelerating deeper learning. Project-based learning encourages students to collaborate for an extended period to solve problems and reach a common goal (Roberts, 2004).

Learner-to-Instructor Engagement

Keegan (1993) states "teaching has to encourage the development of new perspectives based upon the integration of the student's existing knowledge with the newly acquired knowledge" (as cited in Leslie, 2019, p. 157). Enabling learner-to-instructor engagement requires frequent and open communication lines between the student and instructor, timely grading and meaningful feedback related to assignment objectives, interaction with posts and class discussions, communication concerning rubric design, and teaching that incorporates Universal Design for Learning. Learner-to-instructor engagement requires a constructivist approach to engagement that engages students and aids long-term learning instead of content delivery alone. It is critical to remember that online learning differs from face-to-face courses because the instructor utilizes the online platform to engage with students, and face-to-face instruction requires instructors to share a physical space with students while instructing (McFarlane & Frederick Taylor University, 2011). It is more important than ever for instructors teaching online to engage students and encourage the development of new knowledge and perspective. The instructor's goal should be to facilitate student driven learning and encourage the learner to utilize content following its presentation instead of only delivering content alone (Keegan, 1993).

Learner-to-Course Engagement

Facilitating learner-to-course engagement requires students to comprehend the "why" behind their learning (Leslie, 2019). By moving away from a purely content-driven and passive learning experience and investigating additional formats—such as podcasting, YouTube, Screencast-O-Matic, or TechSmith Relay (Knowmia)—faculty may ensure a rich and engaging

course structure that appeals to various learning styles. Response to various teaching techniques may encourage students to reach a deeper level of engagement with course content and find new ways of comprehending the “why” behind the learning.

Conclusion

While employing the TSE framework in a completely online learning environment presents unique challenges for implementation than a traditional face-to-face course. It requires planning and preparation on the part of the instructor, a willingness to engage students and follow through with the planned curriculum, and intentional reflection and willingness to make alterations from semester to semester based on the students’ unique needs. Moreover, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may lack the necessary resources such as reliable computers and stable internet connections to experience similar success levels to their peers in courses offered entirely online. Further research is necessary to deduce ways to mitigate this effect. Though full employment of the TSE framework and its elements requires intentionality and careful planning, the need is present now more than ever. Overwhelming evidence shows that students will benefit from higher engagement levels across the spectrum (Farmer et al., 2019). Initial phases of incorporating the TSE framework in existing online courses will require reevaluation, reflection, and modifications as course engagement, faculty engagement, and student engagement strategies are implemented to ensure increased student engagement levels (Leslie, 2020). Suggested courses of action include faculty training, support, collaboration with student success offices, and professional development related to incorporating the TSE framework into existing online courses. Institutions looking to create an online teaching professional development for faculty can utilize the TSE framework to engage and educate faculty about the TSE implementation in their courses (Leslie, 2021).

Additionally, universities and faculty must examine the TSE’s principles immediately applicable to existing courses and examine existing online course and university protocol in place that currently aim to increase and facilitate student engagement. Faculty members may incorporate the TSE into standing activities and course objectives and create and redesign course initiatives to facilitate student-to-student engagement and student-to-instructor engagement while still meeting course outcomes and objectives. Faculty can be more intentional in how they engage students in their online course experience by enhancing the incorporation of the three principles of the TSE framework—which may, in turn, lead to greater self-efficacy for course

completion, a higher level of buy-in, and engagement in the degree program and university, and ultimately catalyze degree completion.

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